"Woman, Life, Freedom:" A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender and Political Activism

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In times of profound societal upheaval, power dynamics undergo transformation, especially when the primary objective is subverting unequal gender order. The concept of agency, crucial in times of social change, emerges as a counterpoint to enduring gendered norms and constrained actions shaped by social, cultural, and linguistic factors (Ahearn 1999). In Iran, the ongoing nationwide movement, triggered by the tragic murder of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, seeks to overturn gender inequality perpetuated by governmental laws. Women played a significant role in street protests vocalizing the rallying cry "Woman, Life, Freedom." Notably, prominent opposition figures, including celebrities and actresses within Iran and diaspora, actively participated, utilizing their social media influence for heightened visibility and impact. However, their transformative efforts faced resistance from deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and drew severe criticism from pro-regime critics, resulting in the arrest and imprisonment of these actresses, hence labeling the movement as a feminist revolution.

The current paper aims at analyzing three instances of the critiques regarding political activism of three Iranian actresses employing Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and addressing these questions: what comprises the core content of the critiques? What are the main ideologies underlying these discourses? Does gender matter in criticizing political activism?

The paper draws on linguistic data collected from three digital discourses, i.e., textual and interactive content facilitated by computer-mediated communication. Two of the discourses are YouTube videos and the third discourse entails an array of comment threads under a video shared on the Instagram platform. The reason for selecting these discourses, despite their limited quantity, is their significant impact and virality, leading to numerous debates on news broadcast channels and social media platforms. Since the data are all in Persian, they are translated into English and then transcribed. In order to provide a clear picture of the sociopolitical background surrounding the political activism of the actresses and the critiques against them, the context in which the data were produced is described. FCDA as Lazar (2007, 2014) puts it is at the intersection of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist studies. Driven by the goals of social emancipation and transformation, FCDA as an analytical mode seeks to explore and criticize how discourse operates to perpetuate hierarchically gendered social orders.

The paper reveals sexism and patriarchy as central ideologies. The discursive analysis of linguistic data shows patterns of trivialization, body-centric humiliation, curbing the intellectual and political agency of activists, and framing a woman's body as a contested ideological site. The examination underscores that the gender of the critic matters less than shared sexist and patriarchal ideologies. The paper argues that the oppression of individual agency in political activism is a strategic maneuver to suppress the entire feminist movement, reinforcing patriarchal norms. Oppression, manifested symbolically in critiques of political activism, raises questions about its effectiveness compared to physical coercion, with arguments suggesting the enduring and insidious nature of symbolic domination, as articulated by Wong (2015).

References

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